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Foreign Policy through Other Means: Hard Power, Soft Power, and China's Turn to Political Warfare to Influence the United States

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Abstract: The People's Republic of China increasingly has turned to political warfare and sharp power to influence U.S. policy toward China and on international issues that it considers important. This turn in part reflects the limited effectiveness of Beijing's much-increased hard power and its never-formidable and now-reduced soft power as means to achieve China's ends with the United States. China's political warfare and uses of sharp power pursue both direct influence on U.S. policy and indirect impact through affecting American attitudes toward China and China-related issues. China's efforts range across many sectors—including business, culture, media, education, and more—and they have prompted reactions and countermeasures. In China's view, the United States has long been engaged in something like political warfare or sharp power undertakings targeting China. If, or as, U.S.-China relations continue to become more adversarial, political warfare, uses of sharp power, and measures to counter them are likely to increase.

In an increasingly adversarial relationship with the United States, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has begun to deploy the weapons of “political warfare” or “sharp power.” These methods for influencing U.S. policies—specifically, U.S. policies toward China and issues that China considers important—are becoming more significant, in large part because China's other means for pursuing its ends have serious limitations. China's long-growing hard power—including its greatly increased military capacity—has limited efficacy, particularly in shaping the positions of the United States on matters that are priorities for both Beijing and Washington. China's hard power is too blunt an instrument, remains in key respects overmatched, and risks provoking costly conflict with—or countermeasures by—the United States and its friends and allies. Beijing's once-much-touted soft power has always been modest and uneven. It has been in decline, undermined by mounting concerns abroad about China's growing hard power and more assertive foreign policy.

Beijing's recent turn to political warfare and sharp power in targeting the United States is, thus, partly a case of *faute de mieux*. But it also reflects China's

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relative strengths and the U.S.'s distinctive vulnerabilities. While the demonstrable impact on the United States of these PRC instruments of influence has been limited, they have been taken seriously and prompted responses. If U.S.-China relations deteriorate into the new cold war that many foresee (and some advocate), the scope and severity of China's political warfare and sharp power efforts, and American reactions, are likely to escalate.

Hard Power—A Double-Edged Sword for a More Formidable China

During more than 40 years of China's "reform and opening to the outside world," rapid economic growth has provided resources for building hard power and, thus, the capacity to induce other states to act, or refrain from acting, in ways that Beijing prefers.¹ China's new-found wealth has underwritten the pursuit of an ambitious program of military modernization, while also creating formidable economic carrots and sticks—principally in the form of granting or denying access to China's markets and, increasingly, Chinese investment and assistance. Development of hard power—specifically its military component—is to be expected from China as a regional and rising global power.²

For China, there has been an additional impetus from history, especially the version cultivated by the PRC regime, and immanent in the nationalist and revolutionary tradition to which the PRC is heir: military and political weakness had made China vulnerable to incursion by European powers, Japan, and the United States during the so-called "century of humiliation" that began in the 1840s. Sovereignty had been partly lost through colonial encroachment (the loss of Taiwan to Japan and Hong Kong to the United Kingdom), the system of treaty ports and extraterritoriality (along China's coast from Dalian to Shanghai to Guangzhou), and foreign control over organs of the Chinese state (such as the Customs Bureau). The founding mythology of the PRC and a key to the legitimacy

¹ Hard power typically is defined primarily in terms of military capacity and (sometimes equally, often secondarily) in terms of the economic capacity to use negative economic incentives, some rising to the level of economic coercion (as well as targeted positive economic incentives). Hard power induces action or forbearance by other states without the persuasion and non-coercive character of soft-power and without the sometimes state-bypassing and often surreptitious methods of sharp power and political warfare. On hard power, its contemporary relevance for the United States, and its relationship to soft power, see, Robert D. Kaplan, "The Virtues of Hard Power," *Forbes*, May 22, 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stratfor/2013/05/22/the-virtues-of-hard-power/#2dc3f02f18f5>; Joseph S. Nye, "Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 4 (July/Aug. 2009), pp. 160-163; and Eliot A. Cohen, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

² See, Michael J. Green and Daniel M. Kliman, "China's Hard Power and Potential for Conflict in Asia," *SERI Quarterly* vol. 4, no. 2 (Apr. 2011), pp. 32-41; and Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present and Future* (Washington, D.C.: RAND Corporation, 2000), pp. 231-242.

of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have been the reestablishment of national unity and strength, and security from foreign threats.

In the 1990s, China's appreciation of the importance of hard power deepened, with two events being particularly notable: the quick and overwhelming allied victory over Iraq during the first Gulf War; and the mixed outcome of the cross-strait crisis spawned by missile tests that Beijing had launched to intimidate voters in Taiwan's first fully democratic presidential election and that prompted the dispatch of ships from the U.S. Navy's 7th Fleet toward the Taiwan Strait.³

Although the gap in military capacity between the United States and China has remained substantial, it is not the sole, or decisive, measure of U.S.-China hard power competition. The most plausible scenarios for U.S.-China military incidents and conflicts continue to be ones involving areas near China, which give China advantages in a limited conflict. China's military strategy has emphasized "A2AD"—anti-access/area denial—to limit the U.S. military's ability to act in areas adjacent to China.⁴ At minimum, Washington no longer has a reliable option to intervene at a low cost to protect its own interests in open seas in the western reaches of the Indo-Pacific region, or the interests of U.S. allies and friends in East and Southeast Asia who are increasingly outmatched by China. This limited shift in relative power in China's favor can threaten the long-standing effectiveness of U.S. deterrence. U.S. defense planners increasingly have to reckon with a future in which China will have significant abilities to project force beyond, as well as within, the first island chain (which runs from Japan's home islands to the archipelagos of Southeast Asia, enclosing the South and East China Seas).⁵

China's growing hard power has underpinned a more assertive approach to external relations or, at least, perceptions abroad that this is the case. Several decades into China's Reform Era, a much more prosperous and powerful China has come to see itself as resuming its rightful place as the preeminent regional power. General Secretary and President Xi Jinping has emphasized his regime's determination to achieve China's "great national rejuvenation" (中华民族伟大复兴)

³ See, Harlan W. Jencks, "Chinese Evaluations of 'Desert Storm': Implications for PRC Security," *Journal of East Asian Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 1992), pp. 447-477; and Andrew Scobell, David Lai and Roy Kamphausen, eds., *Chinese Lessons from Other People's Wars* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2011), especially ch. 1, 5.

⁴ See, James Dobbins, Andrew Scobell, Edmund J. Burke, David C. Gompert, Derek Grossman, Eric Heginbotham, Howard J. Shatz, "Conflict with China Revisited: Prospects, Consequences, and Strategies for Deterrence," (Washington, D.C.: RAND Corporation, 2016); and Kit Waterman and Doug Stokes, "Operational Change and American Grand Strategy in the Context of the China Challenge," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 12, no. 2 (Summer 2019), pp. 203-227.

⁵ See, U.S. Department of Defense, Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019; Research Brief, Developing a U.S. Strategy for Dealing with China (Washington, D.C.: RAND Corporation, 2014).

and to make China a leading military and economic power by the middle of the twenty-first century.⁶

Achievement of Xi's "China Dream" (中国梦) is significantly frustrated by the problem of China not having "recovered" Taiwan. Although Xi has not fundamentally changed Beijing's cross-Straits policy of tolerating the status quo for the time being (but with an ultimate goal of unification), he has insisted that the Taiwan issue will not be left over "from generation to generation" and that the formula for Taiwan's unification must be the "one country, two systems" model first implemented in Hong Kong.⁷ His relatively conventional policy statements became more foreboding in the context of other signals from Beijing concerning hard power, such as: pointed reminders that Beijing has not foresworn the use of force to achieve unification; and stepped-up Chinese military activities near Taiwan (including increased patrols by navy ships and military aircraft to both the mainland and Pacific Ocean sides of Taiwan, and dispatches of fighter jets to the median line of the Strait).⁸ Significant in its implications for Taiwan (and, especially, Taiwan's 2020 elections), the shadow of China's hard power loomed more urgently over Hong Kong's protracted protests in 2019, especially when Beijing appeared briefly to contemplate deploying People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops or the paramilitary People's Armed Police to quell the unrest.⁹

China has used the increasingly formidable People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), and China Maritime Service (a rough analogy to a coast guard), as well as ostensibly civilian fishing boats, to press more forcefully its disputed claims to territorial sovereignty and maritime rights in the South and East China Seas. At the southern reaches of the South China Sea, the PRC undertook a massive project of building islands and military facilities.¹⁰ Faced with a strikingly adverse decision

⁶ Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Oct. 18, 2017; and "Speech Delivered by Xi Jinping at the First Session of the 13th NPC," *China Daily*, Mar. 21, 2018.

⁷ Xi Jinping, "Speech at the Meeting Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Message to Taiwan Compatriots: Working Together to Realize Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and Advance China's Peaceful Reunification," Jan. 2, 2019.

⁸ For overviews, see, "China's Evolving Military Strategy against Taiwan," National Bureau of Asian Research, June 4, 2018, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-evolving-military-strategy-against-taiwan/>; and Ben Blanchard and Yimou Lee, "China Could Flex Military Muscles to Pressure Taiwan Post-Election," *Reuters*, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-election-analysis/china-could-flex-military-muscles-to-pressure-taiwan-post-election-idUSKBN1ZC0LE>.

⁹ Steven Lee Myers, "China Hints Its Troops Could Be Used to Quell Hong Kong Protests," *New York Times*, July 24, 2019 (quoting Colonel Wu Qian); and "Videos Show People's Armed Police Assembling in Shenzhen Apparently for Exercises," *Global Times*, Aug. 12, 2019 (tasks and missions of People's Armed Police include dealing with "serious violent and illegal incidents, terrorist attacks and other social security incidents").

¹⁰ See, Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, "China's Island Builders: The People's War at Sea," *Foreign Affairs*, Apr. 9, 2015.

by an international arbitral tribunal in a case brought by the Philippines over South China Sea claims, Beijing pointedly dismissed the award as a mere “scrap of paper.” Despite Washington’s general support for Manila’s resort to arbitration and the U.S.’s strongly expressed interest in vindicating the liberal law of the sea principles that the tribunal upheld, the Philippines government largely abandoned the panel’s sweeping award. This reticence reflected a sober appreciation of China’s vastly superior hard power, including its then-recently-demonstrated ability to block Filipino access to disputed areas (although the change of presidents in Manila and China’s economic leverage over the Philippines were significant factors as well).¹¹ China’s hard power, and willingness to use it, at least in limited ways, was thus made clear to rival maritime claimants Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, and indirectly to others in the region.

Beijing’s retrenched but resilient backing for North Korea, and its strident reaction to the U.S. deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea underscored the impact of China’s hard power. South Korea acceded to Beijing’s demands not to deploy additional anti-ballistic missile systems, join a U.S. regional defense system, or forge a closer U.S.-Japan-Korea military alliance. In the THAAD incident, as with the Philippines arbitration, China’s hard power advantages were magnified by other influences: China’s economic leverage over South Korea—as demonstrated by the harm inflicted on the mainland business of Lotte, the South Korean firm that provided land for the THAAD site—and the more accommodationist China and North Korea policy preferences of a new president in Seoul.¹²

In addressing the most likely points of conflict or confrontation with the United States, China has sought to enhance its geographic advantages in the possible use of hard power by asserting an asymmetry of interests. In Beijing’s framing, China has more vital interests at stake (reclaiming sovereignty over lost territory and protecting Chinese security in its very near-abroad) than does the United States (maintaining alliance structures and less formal partnerships, freedom of navigation, and a rules-based international order).¹³ To the extent that

¹¹ See, Jacques deLisle, “Political-Legal Implications of the July 2016 Arbitration Decision in the Philippines-PRC Case Concerning the South China Sea: The United States, China, and International Law,” *Asian Yearbook of International Law*, vol. 21 (2015), pp. 49-82; and Suisheng Zhao, “China and the South China Sea Arbitration: Geopolitics Versus International Law,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 27, no. 109 (Aug. 2017), pp. 1-15.

¹² Michael D. Swaine, “Chinese Views on South Korea’s Deployment of THAAD,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 62 (Winter 2017); and Jeongseok Lee, “Back to Normal?: The End of the THAAD Dispute between China and South Korea,” *Jamestown China Brief*, vol. 17, no. 15 (Nov. 22, 2017). China’s use of economic leverage is hard power under some definitions.

¹³ See, for example, Charles L. Glaser, “A U.S.-China Grand Bargain?” *International Security* vol. 29, no. 4 (2015), pp. 49-90; and Aaron L. Friedberg, “The Sources of Chinese

it persuades, this characterization, backed by China's absolute and relative gains in hard power, gives U.S. allies and friends and others seeking or counting on U.S. support reasons to be less certain about Washington's commitments.

Against the backdrop of an inexorably deteriorating cross-Straits military balance, Taiwan perennially, although unevenly, worries that the United States will "abandon Taiwan" (a concern sometimes fed by arguments from U.S. policy intellectuals whose assessments reflect China's rising power) or that the United States will treat Taiwan as a "bargaining chip" (one that might be traded away to advance U.S. interests in bilateral relations with the PRC).¹⁴ Although participants in the 2019 Hong Kong protests ardently appealed to the United States (as well as Hong Kong's former colonial ruler, the United Kingdom) for political support, there was no prospect that foreign hard power would be transformative, and the more realistic among the movement's participants (and outside observers) recognized that any ability London or Washington once had to influence Beijing on the treatment of Hong Kong had waned severely as China's strength and confidence have grown.¹⁵

In the South China Sea arbitration with the Philippines, China reprised its familiar themes of sovereignty as a core interest (including for places long outside China's control) and applied them to reject the tribunal's authority. According to Beijing's critique, the panel could not decide the case without addressing the question of sovereignty over contested territory—an issue that lay beyond the competence of any United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) proceeding and that could not be the subject of an international dispute because the relevant areas were inalienably part of China's sovereign domain. More narrowly, Beijing declared that the tribunal lacked jurisdiction because the case involved questions of military affairs and policing powers—matters of national security that the PRC's reservations had placed beyond the reach of any UNCLOS dispute resolution process. When South Korea moved to deploy THAAD, China framed the action as a U.S. threat to China's national security and an instrument of Washington's anti-China strategic agenda.¹⁶

Conduct: Explaining Beijing's Assertiveness," *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 4 (2015), pp. 133-150.

¹⁴ Charles Glaser, "Will China's Rise Lead to War?" *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 2 (March-Apr. 2011), pp. 80-91; Nancy Bernkopf Tucker and Bonnie Glaser, "Should the United States Abandon Taiwan?" *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 4 (2011), pp. 23-37; and Jacques deLisle, "United States-Taiwan Relations: Tsai's Presidency and Washington's Policy," *China Review*, vol. 18, no. 33 (Aug. 2018), pp. 13-60.

¹⁵ Jacques deLisle, "Hong Kong's Summer of Discontent," *Orbis*, vol. 63, no. 4 (Fall 2019), pp. 491-501; Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019, H.R. 3289, 116th Cong. 1st Sess. (2019); and Finbarr Bermingham, "Hong Kong People Could Feel 'Most of the Pain' from US Human Rights Act, American Experts Warn," *South China Morning Post*, Nov. 19, 2019.

¹⁶ "Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China on the Award of the Arbitral Tribunal in the South China Sea Arbitration Established at the Request of the Republic of the Philippines," July 12, 2016; and Swaine, "Chinese Views on South Korea's Deployment of THAAD."

In these several ways, China's expanded hard power, and policies partly reflecting that power, have affected U.S. policies toward China and regional issues important to China. East and Southeast Asian states allied or aligned with the United States have become more wary of crossing China, partly because of the relative shift in hard power in China's favor. U.S. policies—some of them long-standing—have become less effective and, in some respects, possibly unviable.

The consequences of China's hard power build-up have not been unmitigatedly positive for Beijing, in terms of its impact on U.S. policy. In a generally contentious relationship or specific regional disputes with the United States, Beijing's hard power still has only limited utility in steering Washington's choices. China's military still significantly lags that of the United States. The risk of escalation in a conflict among nuclear powers remains a potent mutual deterrent, and thus limits either side's ability to coerce. With China's economy still heavily (albeit decreasingly) dependent on trade, the dire economic consequences for China of war, confrontation short of war, or even a highly tense security relationship that spurs economic “decoupling” are prospects that constrain Beijing's ability to use its hard power to shape Washington's policies.

China's rising hard power—along with its more assertive foreign policy—have been significant drivers of the recent negative turn in U.S. policy toward China, especially in security affairs. Faced with a more powerful China and more worried partners in Asia, U.S. administrations have put forth policy orientations that are—rightly—regarded as aimed at China: the Obama administration's “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia, which pledged a greater focus of military resources and policy attention on the region; the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was presented as the economic complement to security rebalancing; and the Trump administration's “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy, which seeks closer strategic cooperation among liberal-democratic states along China's periphery.¹⁷

By the later 2010s, U.S. national security and defense policy had recast the PRC, replacing the “strategic partner” and “responsible stakeholder” aspirations of the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush years with characterizations of China as a “strategic competitor.”¹⁸ The National Security Strategy (2017) declared:

¹⁷ “Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific,” Nov. 16, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific>; “Advancing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Region,” Nov. 18, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/advancing-a-free-and-open-indo-pacific-region/>.

¹⁸ Joint United States-China Statement (President William J. Clinton of the United States of America and President Jiang Zemin of the People's Republic of China), Oct. 29, 1997, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/WCPD-1997-11-03/pdf/WCPD-1997-11-03-Pg1680.pdf>; and Robert Zoellick, “Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility—Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations,” Sep. 21, 2005, [https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/—Zoellick remarks notes06 winter spring.pdf](https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/—Zoellick%20remarks%20notes06%20winter%20spring.pdf).

The United States will seek areas of cooperation with competitors [including China] from a position of strength, foremost by ensuring our military power is second to none and fully integrated with ... all of our instruments of power. . . . America's competitors weaponize information to attack the values and institutions that underpin free societies, while shielding themselves from outside information.¹⁹

Similarly, the National Defense Strategy (2018) stated:

China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage. As China continues its economic and military ascendance, asserting power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy, it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.²⁰

The policy language is striking and leaves little room for China to influence U.S. policy, except in the limited and negative sense of moving the United States to invest more attention, and resources, to address what it sees as a China threat.

Alongside these broad frameworks have come more concrete policy measures, including, for example: the Obama administration's reaffirmation that the U.S.'s mutual security pact with Japan extended to defense of Japanese control of the islands that are the focus of Japan-China disputes in the East China Sea;²¹ Congress's passage in 2018-2020 of several pieces of legislation emphatically supporting closer military cooperation and higher-level quasi-diplomatic ties with Taiwan;²² and a significant increase in the Pentagon budget devoted to addressing China-related contingencies.

¹⁹ "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," Dec. 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

²⁰ "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America," 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>; and Kate O'Keeffe and Siobhan Hughes, "US Defense Bill Aims to Counter China as Rivalry Deepens," *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 1, 2018.

²¹ "Hillary Rodham Clinton Remarks Following Signing Ceremonies," Hanoi, Vietnam, Oct. 30, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/10/150189.htm>; and White House, "Joint Press Conference with President Obama and Prime Minister Abe of Japan," Akasaka Palace, Tokyo, Japan, Apr. 24, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/24/joint-press-conference-president-obama-and-prime-minister-abe-japan>.

²² H.R.2810, 115th Congress (2017–2018), National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018, § 1259(b)(7), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/2810>; H.R.535, 115th Congress (2017–2018), *Taiwan Travel Act*, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/535/TIA>; and S.2736, 115th

Alliance dynamics could make matters worse for Beijing and its quest to make U.S. policies more compatible with Chinese interests and preferences. China's growing military power and more assertive posture toward weaker neighbors gives regional states reason to pursue hedging strategies through security ties with the United States, which, in turn, reduces pressure on Washington to accommodate such states' aversion to U.S. policies that Beijing sees as provocative.²³ If the United States and China spiral deeper into a hostile relationship, Washington may increasingly press regional states to take sides. If those states conclude that they no longer have the luxury to rebuff security demands analogous to Washington's largely failed calls to shun the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), or to bar Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei from a role in their 5G systems, China will face a region—and perhaps a world—split along bipolar lines, with Beijing's shrunk or backfiring influence on Washington coming to resemble Moscow's during the Cold War.

U.S. efforts to assuage the concerns of friends and allies in the region are not certain to succeed, or to be equally effective across the U.S.'s diverse partners. The inherent challenges, rooted in structural shifts in the relative power of China and the United States, have been exacerbated by candidate and, later, President Trump's evident disdain for allies and aversion to the financial costs of security alliances. Even this seeming weak point for the United States may mean that China faces perverse effects from its increased power. If the U.S.'s regional friends' and allies' fears of abandonment grow, Washington will face greater imperatives to offer stronger reassurances. In addition to reinforcing Beijing's concerns that U.S. policies are "anti-China," such moves can make more likely the entrapment dynamic inherent in alliances between a stronger power and a weaker partner: U.S. friends in the region might become overconfident of U.S. support against China, taking greater risks of confrontation or conflict with China that the United States may not be able to avoid supporting, lest its commitments more generally lose credibility.²⁴

Congress (2017–2018), Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, <https://www.congress.gov/bills/115th-congress/senate-bill/2736>.

²³ See, Darren J. Lim and Zack Cooper, "Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia," *Security Studies*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2014), pp. 696–727; and Evan S. Medeiros, "Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia-Pacific Stability," *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2010), pp. 145–167.

²⁴ See, Michael Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of US Defense Pacts," *International Security*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2015), pp. 7–48; and Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics*, vol. 36, no. 4 (1984), pp. 461–495.

Soft Power Outage—The United States Reevaluates China

During the long era of the U.S. policy of engagement or constructive engagement with China, which began with the normalization of U.S.-PRC relations and the launching of China's Reform Era near the end of the 1970s, the influence or potential influence of an apparently benign, or at least non-threatening, China increased considerably. By the 1990s, it had become commonplace to note China's considerable "soft power"—the ability to shape another state's policies and actions through attraction and persuasion.²⁵ Top leaders Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping both prominently identified soft power as a key resource to be developed and deployed in the service of China's foreign policy.²⁶ And the most important issue in China's foreign policy was relations with the United States—a bilateral relationship the preeminence of which prompted hyperbolic characterizations as the "G2" or "Chimerica."²⁷

In a time of frustration with political and policy dysfunction in Washington, U.S. political commentators sometimes wrote—wistfully, admiringly, and occasionally ominously—of the Chinese regime's ability to make sensible, long-term policy commitments that served the national interest.²⁸ American and U.S.-based commentators began to talk of a China Model of development (for achieving rapid economic development with remarkable political stability), or a Beijing consensus (defined as a pragmatic and innovative approach to achieve equitable development with social cohesion and national autonomy, in pointed contrast to the widely criticized Washington Consensus that demanded painful

²⁵ On soft power, see, Joseph S. Nye, Jr. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004). On Chinese conceptions of soft power, see, Li Mingjiang, "China Debates Soft Power," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Winter 2008), pp. 287-308; and 王沪宁 [Wang Huning], "作为国家实力的文化软实力 [Culture as National Power: Soft Power]," *复旦大学学报 [Journal of Fudan University]* (March. 1993).

²⁶ Hu Jintao, "Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects," Report to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Part of China, Oct. 15, 2007, § VII; and Xi Jinping, Speech to the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, *Xinhua*, Nov. 29, 2014. ("We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world.")

²⁷ C. Fred Bergsten, "Two's Company," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 5; Sept.-Oct. 2009, Robert B. Zoellick and Justin Yifu Lin, "Recovery Rides on the 'G-2,'" *Washington Post*, March 6, 2009; Niall Ferguson, "Team 'Chimerica,'" *Washington Post*, Nov. 17, 2008; and Kerry Brown, "Chimerica: Obama Visits Beijing," *Open Democracy*, Oct. 27, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/chimerica-obama-visits-beijing/>.

²⁸ Thomas L. Friedman, "China for a Day (But Not for Two)" in *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution—and How It Can Renew America* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2008), pp. 371-394; and Eric X. Li, "The Life of the Party: The Post-Democratic Future Begins in China," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 2013), pp. 34-46.

neoliberal reforms in hard-pressed developing countries), or a Chinese model of governance based on political meritocracy.²⁹ Surveying China's formidable efforts to build its image and influence around the world, one prominent assessment concluded that China was engaged in a potent soft power "charm offensive" with global reach, including in countries that had long and close relationships with the United States.³⁰

In the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2008, China's international stature rose further with its inclusion as a key member of the G20 group of leading economies (expanded from the former developed-economy-dominated G8 and G7) that assembled to address the most severe worldwide economic setback since the Great Depression. China seemed to be taking on the hoped-for role of responsible pillar of the status quo international order.

Chinese companies seemed to be emerging as appealing—or at least well-known—foreign brands in the United States, echoing (albeit faintly) an important feature of American soft power. Prominent examples included Haier in appliances, and Lenovo in personal computers (gaining prominence when it acquired IBM's PC division). Before its image was defined by high-profile charges of intellectual property theft, evading U.S. sanctions on Iran, and potential creation of vulnerabilities in its products that could be used for PRC espionage, Huawei had been gaining a reputation as a highly competitive producer of telecommunications equipment for U.S. and global markets.³¹

In other areas associated with soft power—such as culture, sports, and education—China's profile in the United States was broadening and deepening during much of the Reform Era. Movies by Zhang Yimou and other prominent PRC directors attracted unprecedented attention and acclaim for Chinese cinema from U.S. audiences and critics.³² National Basketball Association (NBA) basketball star Yao Ming became a de facto soft power ambassador for China,

²⁹ See, S. Philip Hsu, Yu-Shan Wu, and Suisheng Zhao, eds., *In Search of China's Development Model: Beyond the Beijing Consensus* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Joseph Fewsmith, "Debating the 'China Model,'" *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 35 (2011); Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus: Notes on the New Physics of Chinese Power*, (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2004); and Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

³⁰ Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World* (Binghamton: Vail-Ballou Press, 2007); and Bates Gill and Yanzhong Huang, "Sources and Limits of Chinese 'Soft Power,'" *Survival*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2006), pp. 17-36.

³¹ See, for example, William J. Holstein, "Emerging Markets, Emerging Giants," *New York Times*, Apr. 22, 2007; and Angela Doland, "Chinese Brands Want to Go Global; Here's Why It's Still So Tough," *AdAge*, Aug. 31, 2015.

³² Mark Magnier, "A Tiger Still Crouching," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 22, 2004; Pamela McClintock "An Auteur+This Actor=Game Change," *Hollywood Reporter*, Nov. 29, 2011; and "Time Person of the Year Runners-Up: Zhang Yimou," *Time*, Dec. 17, 2008.

starring on the court and in endorsement ads for consumer products.³³ When Beijing won the right to host the 2008 Summer Olympics, it marked a significant recovery from the blow China's reputation had suffered in the United States after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, which had doomed Beijing's bid to host the 2000 games. Anticipating—ultimately, incorrectly—that the Games would showcase to viewers in the U.S. and elsewhere a modern, impressive China, Chinese authorities tapped director Zhang Yimou to choreograph lavish opening ceremonies, and NBC broadcast the games replete with the coiner of the phrase “Beijing Consensus”.³⁴

Chinese media were expanding and becoming more visible in U.S. markets, presenting a generally positive view of China to, and for, U.S. audiences. Boxes with copies of *China Daily* began to appear on U.S. street corners. China Central Television's English-language channel began to be included in cable subscription packages of U.S. viewers. State and state-linked entities took out ads—sometimes full supplements—in U.S. newspapers.

China began to establish Confucius Institutes (CI) in the United States, with a declared mission to promote Chinese language-learning and Chinese culture. By 2020, there were around 100 CIs at colleges and “classrooms” in secondary and primary schools in the United States.³⁵ Presenting themselves as something akin to the Alliance Française or Germany's Goethe Institute, CIs initially enjoyed a relatively positive reception.³⁶ They provided resources for teaching and cultural activities that expanded the offerings at smaller and less wealthy schools. By the turn of the millennium, CIs were being established at some top-tier U.S. research universities, supporting programming on a wide range of China-related issues, some of them relevant to foreign policy.

The number of American students studying Chinese language—and China—burgeoned. College enrollments in Chinese language courses topped 50,000, making Chinese the sixth-most-taught foreign language at U.S. institutions

³³ Brook Larmer, *Operation Yao Ming* (New York: Penguin, 2005); and Ron Gluckman, “Back in China, Basketball Legend Yao Ming Pursues Philanthropy,” *Forbes*, June 28, 2017.

³⁴ Kevin Caffrey, ed., *The Beijing Olympics: Promoting China* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011); Jim Yardley, “China's Leaders Try to Impress and Reassure World,” *New York Times*, Aug. 8, 2008; Peabody Awards, “Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony and Zhang Yimou, NBC, 2008,” <http://peabodyawards.com/award-profile/beijing-olympics-opening-ceremony-and-zhang-yimou>; and Danny Shea, “Joshua Cooper Ramo: Who is NBC's China Analyst during the Olympics,” *Huffington Post*, Sept. 11, 2008, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/joshua-cooper-ramo-who-is_n_118225.

³⁵ “About Confucius Institute/Classroom,” http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm.

³⁶ Howard W. French, “Another Chinese Export is All the Rage: China's Language,” *New York Times*, Jan. 11, 2006; Erik W. Robelen, “Chinese Aid Boosts Mandarin Language Instruction in U.S.,” *Education Week*, Oct. 5, 2010; and Melissa Allen, “UNL Confucius Institute Receives International Praise for Chinese Education,” *Daily Nebraskan*, Jan. 28, 2013.

of higher education.³⁷ To narrow slightly the huge gap with the number of Chinese students at U.S. schools, the Obama administration announced a “100,000 strong” initiative, which sought to increase sharply the number of U.S. students studying in China, and Chinese universities established numerous (often revenue-seeking) programs to attract U.S. students.³⁸ All of these activities seemed, plausibly, to be mechanisms that could generate Chinese soft power in ways that could have an impact on Americans’ view of China and, in turn, U.S. policies related to China.

Yet, by the middle to late 2010s, the situation had changed dramatically. The decline of China’s soft power did not occur all at once or evenly across all dimensions, but its collapse was unmistakable in areas relevant to influencing U.S. policy. In sharp contrast to Clinton-era arguments seeking domestic support for China’s World Trade Organization (WTO) accession, when Obama sought congressional and public backing for the TPP, he presented the trade pact in terms that drew a contrast between U.S.-style market liberalism and a rival Chinese paradigm.³⁹ A few years later, in a speech on the Trump administration’s China policy that was much-noted in China, Vice President Mike Pence charged China with building its formidable economy “at the expense of its competitors—especially the United States” and striving to “win the commanding heights of the 21st century economy . . . by any means necessary,” including by targeting the “foundation of our economic leadership.”⁴⁰ Writings by policy intellectuals influential with presidential administrations, as well as some academics and journalists reflected, and reinforced, an increasingly negative assessment of China and a malign or threatening Chinese agenda.⁴¹

³⁷ Dennis Looney and Natalia Lusin, “Enrollments in Languages Other than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Summer 2016 and Fall 2016,” June 2019, p. 32, <https://www.mla.org/content/download/110154/2406932/2016-Enrollments-Final-Report.pdf>.

³⁸ “100,000 Strong Educational Exchange Initiatives: 100,000 Strong China,” United States Department of State, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/100k//index.htm>.

³⁹ “President Obama: Writing the Rules for 21st Century Trade,” White House, Feb. 18, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/02/18/president-obama-writing-rules-21st-century-trade>; President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address, Jan. 20, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015>.

⁴⁰ “Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration’s Policy toward China,” *The White House*, Oct. 4, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-administrations-policy-toward-china/>.

⁴¹ Examples of an otherwise diverse genre of critical views include: Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011); Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon* (New York: St. Martin’s Press 2015); and Peter W. Navarro, *Death by China* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011).

For an overview of the shift in views of China among policy elites, see, Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein, “Rivalry and Security in a New Era for U.S.-China

China has behaved in ways that have undercut its soft power with the United States. The political component of Chinese soft power had always been weak, especially with audiences in countries that have broadly liberal and democratic values. Indeed, in the early discourse concerning a “Chinese model,” Chinese analysts and commentators had been wary of promoting, or even articulating, such a model, in part because they foresaw the limited international appeal of China’s paradigm for politics and government.⁴² During the Hu Jintao years, senior Chinese officials had rejected purportedly universal liberal and democratic values as unsuited to China. Under Xi Jinping, this argument sharpened and escalated, bringing more pointed and formal rebukes of “so-called” universal values and putting forth a more assertive view that a Chinese model held lessons for other countries.⁴³

In 2019 and early 2020, China’s political image with many U.S. audiences took a further turn for the worse. The biggest, most politically salient stories out of China showed the regime at its most antithetical to American values: China’s increased pressure and bullying of democratic Taiwan, including moves to isolate it internationally by poaching some of its few remaining diplomatic allies and narrowing access to international organizations, and efforts to influence Taiwan’s democratic elections through manipulation of social media; Beijing’s hard line policies toward the pro-democracy, pro-rule-of-law protests in Hong Kong, including the fleeting specter in mid-summer of forcible intervention reminiscent of the suppression of the student-led pro-democracy movement at Tiananmen in 1989; the detention of hundreds of thousands Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang amid a massive, radical program of forced cultural assimilation; and the apparent mishandling of the coronavirus, due at least in part to the pathologies of an authoritarian bureaucratic system that discouraged reporting, higher-level authorities’ suppression of information, China’s rejection of offers of foreign assistance, and Beijing’s possible pressure on the World Health Organization (WHO) to portray China’s response favorably.

In the United States, China’s economic success was increasingly perceived as adverse to American interests. This view was acutely manifest in the rhetoric of the Trump campaign’s attacks on Chinese economic policy and behavior and in the Trump administration’s tariff-backed “trade war,” but it was also the focus

Relations” in Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein, eds., *After Engagement: Dilemmas and Dangers in U.S.-China Security Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2020).

⁴² Jacques deLisle, “Soft Power in a Hard Place,” *Orbis*, vol. 54, no. 3 (Fall 2010), pp. 503-504.

⁴³ General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, “Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere,” Apr. 22, 2013, translation at <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>; Chris Buckley, “China Takes Aim at Western Ideas,” *New York Times*, Aug. 19, 2013; and Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society.” (China is “blazing a new trail for other developing countries” and “offers a new option for other countries . . . to speed up their development while preserving their independence.”)

of a striking bipartisan near-consensus in Washington policy circles that engagement had failed and that a tougher line was needed. In this view, China's gains had come through cheating on the rules of a liberal international economic order (including, most prominently, the WTO), and had been accrued at the expense of American jobs, prosperity, and leadership in technology. With China framed as a serious economic threat—as well as a rising geopolitical rival—Chinese soft power crumbled, and the narrative of a “whole of society” and “whole of government” conflict came to the fore in the United States.⁴⁴

From early on, official U.S. sources and other assessments were skeptical of Chinese assertions that AIIB and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) were benign efforts to promote economic development internationally and to fill shortfalls left by existing institutions. In critical U.S. accounts, AIIB was a Chinese bid to create a rival institution to established multilateral development banks, but with lower standards on environment, anti-corruption, and other matters, as well as a greater opportunity for Chinese geopolitical influence. From this perspective, the broader BRI was a serious case of low, and corrosive, standards, and a tool for China's gaining political leverage, through debt and investment, over weaker states—a criticism that gained traction when several states canceled or renegotiated BRI deals and Beijing tried to rebrand the BRI in more benevolent terms.⁴⁵

The bloom was also off the rose for Chinese companies in the United States. In the most prominent example, Huawei was identified increasingly as a national security problem. The company and its affiliates were accused—including in a federal racketeering indictment—of evading U.S. restrictions on dealing with Iran and North Korea, and widespread and systematic theft of U.S. intellectual property.⁴⁶ At Washington's request, the company's chief financial officer—and the daughter of its founder—was arrested in Canada and detained for possible

⁴⁴ See, for example, “Confronting the China Threat: Director Wray Says Whole-of-Society Response is Needed to Protect U.S. Economic and National Security,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, Feb. 6, 2020, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/wray-addresses-china-threat-at-doj-conference-020620>; “Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration's Policy toward China”; and Robert Sutter, “Pushback: America's New China Strategy,” *The Diplomat*, Nov. 2, 2018.

⁴⁵ See, Jane Perlez, “U.S. Opposing China's Answer to World Bank,” *New York Times*, Oct. 9, 2014; Geoff Raby, “China's AIIB: Part of a Much Bigger Master Plan,” *National Interest*, Apr. 28, 2015; Joel Wuthnow, “From Friend to Foe-ish: Washington's Negative Turn on the Belt and Road Initiative,” *Asian Forum*, May 21, 2018, <http://www.theasanforum.org/from-friend-to-foe-ish-washingtons-negative-turn-on-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>; and Nadège Rolland, “A Concise Guide to the Belt and Road Initiative,” National Bureau of Asian Research, Apr. 11, 2019, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/a-guide-to-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

⁴⁶ “Chinese Telecommunications Conglomerate Huawei and Subsidiaries Charged in Racketeering Conspiracy and Conspiracy to Steal Trade Secrets,” United States Department of Justice, Feb. 13, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/chinese-telecommunications-conglomerate-huawei-and-subsidiaries-charged-racketeering>.

extradition. The U.S. government banned Huawei products from many government uses, and from the build-out of U.S. 5G networks because of concerns that Huawei might install backdoor means for the Chinese government to access U.S. information and control U.S. equipment, and, more generally, that Huawei would not refuse, or be able to refuse, the Chinese Party-state's demands for cooperation in possible moves to undermine U.S. national security.⁴⁷

More broadly, the United States government moved to tighten scrutiny of investment by Chinese companies in national security-sensitive sectors—defined capaciously and extending national economic security interests. Chinese entities faced tougher review by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) and amendments to the CFIUS process undertaken by the Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act (FIRRMA) in 2018.⁴⁸ More mundane instances of Chinese firms' acquisitions of U.S. companies also reflected, and reinforced, China's deteriorating image and waning soft power. For example, when the Chinese company Shuanghui acquired Smithfield (a major U.S. pork producer), it spotlighted for American audiences China's chronic problems with food safety, and the sorry reputation at home of Chinese firms in the food sector. The acquisition was reported as a move by a Chinese company, facing worried consumers, to buy the U.S. company's reputation for safety.⁴⁹

In cultural matters, despite the promise of some earlier successes, Chinese movies failed to gain popularity with mainstream American audiences, and the soft power potential of Chinese films waned as a chillier political climate and tighter content restrictions took hold in the PRC's movie industry.⁵⁰ In the United States,

⁴⁷ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, Public Law 115-232, Aug. 13, 2018, § 889; *FCC News*, "FCC Bars Use of Universal Service Funding for Equipment and Services Posing National Security Risks," Nov. 22, 2019, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-360976A1.pdf>; and Nigel Inkster, "The Huawei Affair and China's Technology Ambitions," *Survival*, vol. 61, no. 9 (2019), pp. 105-111. Disclosure: the author submitted an opinion in support of the position taken by Huawei in the proceedings leading to this FCC determination, [https://ecfsapi.fcc.gov/file/10806043972847/Huawei%20Ex%20Parte%20Written%20Submission%20Docket%20No.%2018-89%20\(08-06-2018\).pdf](https://ecfsapi.fcc.gov/file/10806043972847/Huawei%20Ex%20Parte%20Written%20Submission%20Docket%20No.%2018-89%20(08-06-2018).pdf).

⁴⁸ Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act of 2018, S.2098, 115th Congress 1st Sess. (2017-2018), May 22, 2018; and Alan Rappaport, "In New Slap at China, U.S. Expands Power to Block Foreign Investments," *New York Times*, Oct. 10, 2018.

⁴⁹ Daniel M. Slane, "The Impact of Shuanghui International Group's Acquisition of Smithfield Foods," Testimony before the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, United States Senate, July 10, 2013; and Tom Levitt, "China Seeks Safety in US Meat Giant Smithfield," *China Dialogue*, June 3, 2013, <https://www.chinadialogue.net/blog/6066-China-seeks-safety-in-US-meat-giant-Smithfield/en>.

⁵⁰ "Do Chinese Films Hold Global Appeal?" China Power Project, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Jan. 2020, <https://chinapower.csis.org/chinese-films/>; Wang Kaihao, "Chinese Films Seek Elusive Overseas Success," *China Daily*, June 5, 2017; Patrick Brzeski, "China's Tightening Censorship is Making a Bad Box Office Year Even Worse," *Hollywood Reporter*, July 16, 2019; and Film Industry Promotion Law of the

criticism began to mount that, rather than enriching cinematic offerings for American audiences, China was beginning to have an adverse effect on the content of one of the U.S.'s most distinctive and soft power-salient exports. Concerns grew that U.S. studios' focus on revenue from the PRC market were foregoing more varied and culturally valuable fare in favor of action movie franchises that did not face language or cultural barriers, or blocking by Chinese censors.⁵¹

By the late 2000s and 2010s, the most iconic Chinese cultural figure for many Americans was the dissident and later exiled multi-media artist Ai Weiwei, whose fame abroad grew with his role in investigating the deaths of schoolchildren due to substandard classroom buildings in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, and his enduring the Chinese regime's abuse, persecution, and suppression (including beatings, destruction of his studio, banning from exhibitions, prosecution on questionable tax charges, and incarceration).⁵²

Sports, too, was an area where China's soft power fell with U.S. audiences. Coverage of the Chinese women's gymnastics team's Olympic success after 2008 focused on evidence that China was breaking rules, as far back as 2000, for the protection of young athletes that prohibited competitors under the age of 16.⁵³ In 2019, the principal "China story" for the NBA was an ugly political one concerning China's reaction to a tweet supporting the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong by an official of the Houston Rockets—ironically, Yao Ming's former team.

In the education sector, the reversal was especially sharp. Confucius Institutes came into ill-odor, perceived as replicating Chinese-style censorship and propaganda abroad. At least two dozen colleges, including several prominent universities (such as the University of Chicago and the flagship state universities

People's Republic of China (2016) (extensive procedure for authorities' review of films and film projects).

⁵¹ "Big in China: The Global Market for Hollywood Movies," World 101: Global Era Issues, Council on Foreign Relations, <https://world101.cfr.org/global-era-issues/globalization/big-china-global-market-hollywood-movies>; and Alissa Wilkinson, "Why Hollywood Keeps Making the Same Kinds of Movies," *Vox*, Sept. 7, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/9/7/16257426/box-office-global-domestic-china-mummy-furious-despicable-me-wolf-warrior>.

⁵² Sandra Ponzanesi, "The Art of Dissent: Ai Weiwei, Rebel with a Cause," in Rosemarie Buikema, Antoine Buyse, and Antonius Robben, eds., *Cultures, Citizenship and Human Rights* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 215-236; Mark Stevens, "Is Ai Weiwei China's Most Dangerous Man?" *Smithsonian Magazine*, Sept. 2012; and Laura Poitras, "The Art of Dissent," *New York Times*, June 9, 2015.

⁵³ Lisa Horne, "Investigation Finds Chinese Gymnasts were Underage," *Bleacher Report*, Feb. 26, 2010, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/353164-investigation-finds-chinese-gymnasts-were-underaged-forfeit-medals>; see, also, Peter Hays Gries, H. Michael Crowson, and Todd Sandel, "The Olympic Effect on American Attitudes towards China: Beyond Personality, Ideology, and Media Exposure," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 19, no. 64 (2010), pp. 213-231.

in Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, and Pennsylvania) shut down their CIs.⁵⁴ In the media, thanks in part to U.S. reporters' frequently quoting its views on controversial and contentious issues, the generally hardline and nationalistic *Global Times* came to rival or surpass the more anodyne *China Daily* as the most visible Chinese state-linked newspaper in the United States. Opinions on China among the American public turned negative as well: the Pew Research Center's annual survey found net unfavorable views from 2013 on, with an especially sharp decline after 2017.⁵⁵

This nearly across-the-board plunge in China's soft power is partly a product of policy choices on both sides, and reflects long-standing cross-national differences in values, as well China's volatile combination of long-tended resentment of historic wrongs and new-found assertiveness as a rising great power seeking what it sees as its rightful place. At a more structural level, China's soft power failure in the United States surely also reflects—perhaps ironically—the rise of China's hard power. As China has narrowed the gap with the United States in military and economic prowess, the United States predictably has responded to China's new capabilities—all the more so because China also has appeared to embrace a more assertive and adverse international agenda. A negative view of China has resonated with the American public, surely in part because of increasingly critical depictions of China by government officials, politicians, and expert commentators.

Politics with Other Means—China's Influence and U.S. Responses

However one assesses China's never-strong and now-much-weakened soft power, its much-increased but difficult-to-use hard power, and the relationship between them, China's hard and soft power assets currently offer limited prospects for shaping U.S. policies and actions that address China or affect what China sees as its important interests. Sharp power or political warfare has offered a different, and in some respects more promising, set of resources. The scope of sharp power or political warfare is imprecise, lying somewhere between hard power and soft power, and between warfare (Clausewitz's continuation of politics with other means) and more ordinary politics among nations (conducted through diplomacy, foreign policy, economic statecraft, and the like). Political warfare and sharp power generally seek to pressure and subvert, rather than coerce

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Redden, "Closing Confucius Institutes," *Inside Higher Ed*, Jan. 9, 2019; and Rachel Peterson, "Confucius Institutes in the US that are Closing," National Association of Scholars, June 2019, <https://www.nas.org/storage/app/media/Reports/Outsourced%20to%20China/confucius-institutes-that-closed-updated-june-3-2019.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Prior to 2013, the year 2008 had been the only one in at least a decade and a half in which Americans' views of China were net unfavorable. Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "U.S. Views of China Turn Sharply Negative amid Trade Tensions," The Pew Research Center, Aug. 13, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/08/13/u-s-views-of-china-turn-sharply-negative-amid-trade-tensions/>.

or persuade. The methods often—although not always—involve some degree of subterfuge, illicit means, avoidance of attribution, and the like.⁵⁶

So defined, political warfare or sharp power would seem to make sense for China in targeting the United States, and not simply because it is better than the flawed alternatives. Although it is usually easy and often misleading to point to approaches and behaviors as part of a cultural or political-cultural repertoire, there is much in political warfare generally, and China's contemporary practice of it, that resonates with long-standing and recent Chinese thinking. Many of the most cited passages from the ancient Chinese military thinker Sun Zi could serve as subheadings for a catalogue (including the abridged one in this article) of recent instances of China's U.S.-targeting acts of political warfare or uses of soft power: the art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting; in war, avoid what is strong and strike at what is weak; let your plans be dark and impenetrable; all warfare is based on deception; the opportunity to defeat the enemy is provided by the enemy himself; in chaos there is opportunity; and so on.⁵⁷

Since its early days, the Chinese Communist Party has emphasized “united front work,” which relies heavily on methods that are in the toolkit of what is now called political warfare.⁵⁸ Since the early 2000s, the PLA has held as one of its principal doctrines “the three warfares” (三战): psychological warfare (心理战), public opinion warfare (舆论战), and legal warfare (法律战)—at least the first two of which (and arguably all of which) are elements of political warfare and sharp power.⁵⁹ Where Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping had spoken of China's need to develop soft power, Xi also has revived the importance of united front work, which he has characterized as a “magic weapon” (法宝) and which encompasses political warfare

⁵⁶ On political warfare and sharp power generally, see, Christopher Walker, “What is Sharp Power?” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2018), pp. 9-23; George F. Kennan, “The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare,” Policy Planning Staff Memorandum No. 269, May 4, 1948, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945-1950, Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment, history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945-50Intel/d269; and Linda Robinson, et al., “The Growing Need to Focus on Modern Political Warfare,” RAND Corporation, 2019.

On China's political warfare, or sharp power, targeting the United States and other democracies, see, Anne-Marie Brady, “Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping,” Woodrow Wilson Center, Sept. 2017; Hal Brands and Toshi Yoshihara, “How to Wage Political Warfare,” *National Interest*, Dec. 16, 2018; and articles by Michael Clarke and his co-authors, and Yoshihara in this issue of *Orbis*.

⁵⁷ Sun Zi, in Michael Nylan, tr., *The Art of War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020).

⁵⁸ See, Toshi Yoshihara's article in this issue of *Orbis*.

⁵⁹ The locus classicus is the “Political Work Guidelines of the People's Liberation Army” (2003). Sangkuk Lee, “China's ‘Three Warfares’: Origins, Applications, and Organizations,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2014), pp. 198-221; and Peter Mattis, “China's ‘Three Warfares’ in Perspective,” *War on the Rocks*, Jan. 30, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective/>.

and sharp power tactics of cultivating political influence with—and over—politicians, media, educational institutions, and publics abroad.⁶⁰

Political warfare also has the advantage of targeting now-evident vulnerabilities in the United States: strong free speech norms and rules in traditional and social media, academia, and public discourse more generally; large and prominent businesses with significant economic interests in China (and elsewhere abroad); and highly partisan and polarized politics.

Whatever one makes of the magnitude and depth of China's turn to political warfare or sharp power in engaging with the United States, China's behavior and the imperative to respond to it have become increasingly central and fraught issues in U.S. policy discourse about China.⁶¹ Academic and policy analysts have paid increasing attention, eclipsing discussions of China's soft power and supplementing analyses of China's growing hard power.⁶² China's efforts and actions have become part of the broader concern over foreign efforts to intervene in U.S. politics and governance, and how to counter them.

China's uses, and perceived uses, of the tools of political warfare and sharp power to influence U.S. policy and American attitudes toward China have led to high-profile incidents and provoked responses. Several examples across a wide range of sectors and issues illustrate the broad pattern.

⁶⁰ Brady, "Magic Weapons"; Alexander Bowe, "China's Overseas United Front Work," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Aug. 24, 2018, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China's%20Overseas%20United%20Front%20Work%20-%20Background%20and%20Implications%20for%20US%20Final%200.pdf>; and Takahashi Suzuki, "China's United Front Work in the Xi Jinping Era," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2019), pp. 83-98.

⁶¹ See, for example, U.S. National Security Strategy (2017), p. 28 (China engaged in "sophisticated political, economic, and military campaigns" that are "calculated to achieve maximum effect without provoking a direct military response" and that "mak[e] it harder for the United States and our allies to respond"); "Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration's Policy toward China" (the intelligence community says "China is targeting U.S. state and local governments . . . to exploit divisions . . . to advance Beijing's political influence" and has "mobilized cover actors, front groups, and propaganda outlets to shift Americans' perceptions of Chinese policies" on a scale that dwarfs Russia's efforts); Aaron L. Friedberg, "Competing with China," *Survival*, vol. 60, no. 3 (2018), pp. 7-64; and Daniel Twining, "Democracy Promotion in a Challenging World," Testimony before U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, June 14, 2018, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20180614/108418/HHRG-115-FA00-Wstate-TwiningD-20180614.pdf>.

⁶² See, the work on China's political warfare and sharp power by Brady, Clarke, Walker, Yoshihara, and others cited earlier in this article; see, also, Bates Gill and Benjamin Schreer, "Countering China's 'United Front,'" *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2018), pp. 155-170; and Seth G. Jones, "The Return of Political Warfare," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Feb. 2018, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180202_Jones_ReturnPoliticalWarfare_Web.pdf?nsT.nzT52.7lzHB.9ZymYwjgnAHFh4X.

U.S. companies in the travel sector—which depend substantially on Chinese markets—have faced pressure to toe China's line on sensitive issues (for Beijing), such as Taiwan and Tibet. Marriott hotels and major U.S. airlines faced PRC pressure and retaliation or threats of retaliation for listing one or both places as destinations in terms that did not clearly identify them as being within China. Framing this as an unacceptable questioning of Beijing's sovereignty over Tibet and its claim that Taiwan is a part of China or, worse yet, conveying possible support for Taiwan's independent status, Beijing used its economic leverage to demand changes to websites. The criticism extended to the companies' labelling of Hong Kong and Macao as well. After enduring a temporary shutdown of Chinese access to its website and threats of a netizen-driven boycott by Chinese customers, Marriott made the demanded changes and issued an apology to China and a condemnation of "separatism." Under threats of fines and reduction in market access, airlines adopted terms, such as "Taiwan, China" or "China Taiwan region" on their websites (although United Airlines dropped country designations altogether for destinations in mainland China and Taiwan).⁶³ Thus, the public position of major U.S. companies in a medium with relatively high visibility to U.S. audiences at least superficially came into alignment with Beijing's preferences.

The apparent capitulations drew sharp criticism in terms that focused on what are, in effect, sharp power or political warfare issues: some companies apparently had allowed Chinese authorities to dictate the positions of multinational businesses that American critics saw as U.S. companies in contexts that could not realistically segregate "PRC" spaces from "U.S." spaces. The Trump administration denounced China's demands for the nomenclature changes as "Orwellian nonsense" and "part of a growing trend by the Chinese Communist Party to impose its political views on American citizens and private companies." A chorus of U.S. commentators joined in the criticism of the companies' behavior.⁶⁴

The controversy over the NBA and Hong Kong protests followed a similar, if more complex, arc. When a Houston Rockets official tweeted, "Fight for freedom. Stand with Hong Kong," the league foresaw risks to its lucrative operations and its long-cultivated popularity in China. The fateful tweet was

⁶³ Benjamin Haas, "Marriott Apologises to China over Tibet and Taiwan Error," *Guardian*, Jan. 12, 2018; Sui-Lee Wee, "Marriott to China: We Do Not Support Separatists," *New York Times*, Jan. 11, 2018; Sui-Lee Wee, "Giving In to China, U.S. Airlines Drop Taiwan (in Name at Least)," *New York Times*, July 25, 2018; and Liu Zhen, "Taiwan Grateful to United for Imaginative Website Solution to 'One China' Rule," *South China Morning Post*, Aug. 29, 2018.

⁶⁴ "Statement from the Press Secretary on China's Political Correctness," May 5, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-chinas-political-correctness/>; Chris Horton, "How Beijing Enlists Global Companies to Pressure Taiwan," *Nikkei Asian Review*, July 25, 2018; and Richard Bernstein, "The Brands that Kowtow to China," *China File*, Mar. 2, 2018, <https://www.chinafile.com/library/nyrb-china-archive/brands-kowtow-china>.

followed by: a social media backlash from China's netizens, implicitly supported by the regime; announcements by the China Basketball Association (nominally headed by Yao Ming) that it would no longer cooperate with the NBA and by China Central Television that airing of NBA games would be suspended; statements largely accommodating China's sensibilities from the team (stating that the author of the tweet "has made it clear that his tweet does not represent the Rockets or the NBA"), from the league (calling the tweet "regrettable" and declaring the NBA's "great respect for the history and culture of China and hope that . . . the NBA can be used as a unifying force," and offering a more solicitous apology on the Chinese version of its website), and from one of the NBA's biggest stars (LeBron James, saying "I believe [the tweeter] just wasn't educated on the situation" in which "so many people could have been harmed, not only financially").⁶⁵

The reaction from U.S. politicians, critics, and audiences to the NBA's initial succumbing to Chinese pressure was swift, severe, and focused on issues related to political warfare or sharp power. The league faced withering charges of abandoning American values of free speech—the same values for which the Hong Kong protesters were courageously fighting—to curry favor with an authoritarian regime in pursuit of financial gain. In the view of some especially pointed critiques, the NBA incident involved an even more troubling form of Chinese interference in U.S. political discourse. Senator Marco Rubio complained on Twitter, "Disgusting...They allow #China punish a U.S. citizen for free speech in order to protect NBA's market access in China." Senator Charles Schumer added, "No one should implement a gag rule on Americans speaking out for freedom." Media commentary was similarly unsparing.⁶⁶ On this reading, pressure or feared consequences from China had moved an iconic American organization to be willing to silence (or at least burden significantly) the political speech of American citizens working for an American entity in the United States. The NBA soon backpedaled, defending its commitment "as an American-based" league

⁶⁵ Ben Cohen, "The NBA Feels a Backlash in China After a Tweet Supporting Hong Kong," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 7, 2019; NBA Statement, Oct. 6, 2019, <https://pr.nba.com/nba-statement/>; and Scott Cacciola, "After Daryl Morey Tweet Backlash, LeBron James Says Executive Was Misinformed on China," *New York Times*, Oct. 16, 2019.

⁶⁶ Marco Rubio, @marcorubio, Twitter, Oct. 7, 2019, <https://twitter.com/marcorubio/status/1181173981422014464?s=11>; Chuck Schumer @SenSchumer, Twitter, Oct. 7, 2019, <https://twitter.com/SenSchumer/status/1181179621640945673>; Alyssa Rosenberg, "The NBA Just Capitulated to China. It's Shocking, But Not a Surprise," *Washington Post*, Oct. 7, 2019; Allan Smith, "U.S. Politicians Call out NBA for 'Kowtowing' to China amid Houston Rockets Controversy," NBC News, Oct. 7, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/disgusting-u-s-politicians-call-out-nba-cowwing-china-amid-n1063161>; and Derek Wallbank and Alfred Cang, "How a Quickly Deleted Tweet about China Got Pretty Much Everyone Mad at the NBA," *Time*, Oct. 7, 2019, <https://time.com/5694150/nba-china-hong-kong/>.

“operating globally” to freedom of expression values, and indicating its willingness to bear significant financial consequences for doing so.⁶⁷

Analogous worries about the impact that Chinese influence and pressure of the content of ideas reaching, and shaping, the American public's views reached into other areas of entertainment and culture. Disquiet about Hollywood's tailoring its offerings to censored Chinese markets expanded to include concerns about how China's political strictures were affecting what U.S. audiences would see on issues that Beijing regards as politically sensitive (and that are issues in the U.S.'s China policy). Reports and rumors grew that studios' hunger for Chinese box office and, increasingly, investment from Chinese sources and opportunities to shoot mainstream U.S. movies in Chinese locations was leading to self-censorship and the foregoing of content, or actors, that Chinese authorities considered politically unacceptable. China's growing impact portended fewer movies, or movies with more China-favorable or China-flattering content, about such subjects as Tibet (which had been a focus of several films offensive to official PRC views through the 1990s), or Xinjiang (which was becoming an issue of greater concern to the U.S. public), or China more generally. The controversial eleventh-hour switch from Chinese to North Korean forces as fictional invaders and occupiers of the United States in the 2012 remake of *Red Dawn*, reportedly in deference to PRC concerns, looked to some like an extreme example of wider insidious effects.⁶⁸

The rebranded U.S. arm of CCTV, China Global Television Network (CGTN), was required to register as an agent of a foreign government. This dubious honor—shared with the notoriously propagandistic Russia Television—indicated the extent to which U.S. authorities had re-envisioned China as a potentially hostile rival great power, and state-linked Chinese media as a source of problematic content targeting American audiences. Subsequently, the U.S. government also designated CGTN and four other Chinese media enterprises as PRC government entities, with attendant restrictions under U.S. law.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ “NBA Commissioner Adam Silver Statement Regarding the NBA and China,” Oct. 8, 2019, <https://www.nba.com/article/2019/10/08/adam-silver-statement-china-nba>; and “NBA Loses ‘Hundreds of Millions’ in China over Hong Kong Tweet,” *Agence France Presse*, Feb. 16, 2020.

⁶⁸ Frank Langfitt, “How China's Censors Influence Hollywood,” NPR Morning Edition, May 18, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/05/18/407619652/how-chinas-censors-influence-hollywood>; Amy Qin and Audrey Carlsen, “How China is Rewriting Its Own Script,” *New York Times*, Nov. 18, 2018; and Ben Fritz and John Horn, “Reel China: How Hollywood Tries to Stay on China's Good Side,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 16, 2011.

⁶⁹ Kate O’Keeffe and Aruna Viswanatha, “Chinese State Media Giant CGTN Registers as Foreign Agent in U.S.” *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 5, 2019; Chen Weihua, “Selective Use of FARA on Media Outlets Deeply Disturbing,” *China Daily*, Sept. 20, 2018; and Anna Fifield, Carol Morello, and Emily Ruhala, “U.S. Designates 5 Major Chinese Media Outlets as Government Entities,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 18, 2020.

Social media emerged as an area of especially opaque and worrisome possible Chinese influence in the United States drawing scrutiny and causing apprehension. Used by younger people in the United States (and elsewhere), the group chat platform WeChat (*weixin* in Chinese) and the video sharing app TikTok are both owned by Chinese tech companies. Although PRC monitoring and censoring of Chinese social media long has been well known, concern about the potential for impact on content consumed outside the Chinese mainland became a bigger issue in 2019. Amid widespread reports from Hong Kong that content favorable to the protesters—or describing the protests—was blocked on WeChat and TikTok, some users in the United States reported milder versions of the same pattern.⁷⁰

More broadly, the anonymity that social media platforms—both Chinese and, especially, U.S. ones—accord to content-providers raised additional concerns. In the context of the limited actions by U.S. social media companies to address the vulnerabilities revealed by foreign interference in the U.S. 2016 elections, there was little to stop tweets and Facebook postings (much less content on WeChat and TikTok) from PRC or PRC-linked sources pushing political positions, or inaccurate factual claims, favored by China from reaching U.S. audiences, without recipients knowing their origin or motivation.

Whether interventions would come from Chinese government agents, cooperative or favor-currying company officials, overzealous staff, or “patriotic” citizens, the potential effects were disconcerting. Ample means for monitoring and chilling expression, and blocking or swamping content, were available to shape online content to fit China’s preferences. These methods could be used—and, at least in connection with the Hong Kong protests, were being used—surreptitiously to affect what users in the United States posted, received and, thus, perhaps thought. That the Hong Kong-related content that triggered heightened concern was advocacy for, and an exercise of, civil liberties and democracy only served to raise the level of alarm.

The backlash against Confucius Institutes has deepened as well. Much of the impetus behind the wave of CI closures was a growing and deepening view among U.S. universities, their constituencies, the U.S. government, and observers that CIs were shaping (or at least might shape) Americans’ views of China—through blocking or creating content—in directions dictated by their overseers at

⁷⁰ TikTok is to be distinguished from its China-only sister app Duoyin. Alex Hern, “Revealed: How TikTok Censors Videos that Do Not Please Beijing,” *The Guardian*, Sept. 25, 2019; Drew Harwell and Tony Romm, “TikTok’s Beijing Roots Fuel Censorship Suspicions as it Builds a Huge U.S. Audience,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 15, 2019; Isobel Asher Hamilton, “WeChat Users in the US Say the App is Censoring their Messages about Hong Kong,” *Business Insider*, Nov. 26, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-wechat-users-censored-messages-hong-kong-china-2019-11>; and Zoe Schiffer, “WeChat Keeps Banning Chinese Americans for Talking about Hong Kong,” *The Verge*, Nov. 25, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/11/25/20976964/chinese-americans-censorship-wechat-hong-kong-elections-tiktok>.

the Chinese government's Hanban or, at least, favored by the Chinese regime.⁷¹ The U.S. government has taken or considered steps to restrict participation by universities with CIs in government-funded programming that supports Chinese studies.⁷²

Pressure in the United States to limit channels for possible Chinese influence on U.S. China policy and U.S. politics through university-centered activities have gone further and spread more widely. Political discourse and policy arguments about the academic sector partly paralleled the controversies concerning U.S. businesses. Reports and calls for action focused on several overlapping issues of Chinese influence on the content of teaching, research, and discussion of China-related issues. Examples included efforts—some purportedly successful—by Confucius Institutes, PRC embassy and consular personnel, and Chinese students on U.S. campuses to prevent events—or to quash content critical of the PRC—on “sensitive” issues, such as Tibet, Taiwan, or the Hong Kong protests. Other often-cited concerns were possible acquiescence of university administrations to Chinese demands in the face of imposed or threatened retaliation that would downgrade the extensive collaborative programs with Chinese partners and Chinese branch campuses that many U.S. schools had established, and self-censorship by U.S. scholars specializing in China who feared potentially career-killing loss of access to research opportunities in China.⁷³ A notable survey of U.S. China scholars found that two-thirds believed that self-censorship—specifically in the context of making public statements on policy issues—was a problem in the field.⁷⁴ A similar concern underlay mounting

⁷¹ “China’s Impact on the U.S. Education System,” United States Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Staff Report, Feb. 27, 2019, <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/PSI%20Report%20China's%20Impact%20on%20the%20US%20Education%20System.pdf>; “On Partnerships with Foreign Governments: The Case of Confucius Institutes,” American Association of University Professors, June 2014, https://www.aaup.org/file/Confucius_Institutes_0.pdf; Rachelle Peterson, “Confucius Institutes on Campus: A New Threat to Academic Freedom,” *Academic Questions*, no. 30 (2017), pp. 327–334; and Edward A. McCord, “Where’s the Beef? Confucius Institutes and Chinese Studies in American Universities,” *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 51, no. 3 (2019), pp. 426–432.

⁷² Elizabeth Redden, “Defense Bill Restricts Funds for Colleges with Confucius Institutes,” *Inside Higher Ed*, Aug. 2, 2018; and CONFUCIUS Act, S.939, 116th Cong. 1st Sess. (2019) (bill not yet passed, concerning Department of Education Title VI centers), <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/s939/BILLS-116s939is.pdf>.

⁷³ See, for example, Kaitlin Mulhere, “China and Academic Freedom,” *Inside Higher Ed*, Dec. 5, 2014; Human Rights Watch, “China: Government Threats to Academic Freedom Abroad,” Mar. 21, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/21/china-government-threats-academic-freedom-abroad>; Anastaysa Lloyd-Damnjanovic, “A Preliminary Study of PRC Political Influence and Interference in American Higher Education,” Woodrow Wilson Center, May 2019; and “China’s Overseas United Front Work.”

⁷⁴ Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Rory Truex, “Repressive Experiences among China Scholars,” *China Quarterly*, May 2019.

criticism of the numerous Chinese Students and Scholars Associations on U.S. campuses for pressuring, and reporting on, fellow Chinese students and U.S. faculty members for statements critical of China or at odds with PRC orthodoxy—partly under instructions from Beijing.

Ill-advised in terms of serving long-term U.S. national interests, but tellingly indicative of the shift in U.S. government attitudes toward the PRC, American students interested in government careers in China-related fields often are now advised not to study or spend extensive time in China. The Trump administration has greatly increased visa scrutiny, delays, and cancellations for Chinese students and scholars, and reportedly contemplated a full-fledged student visa ban. Researchers traveling from China to the United States have faced occasional, but sometimes intensive, probing by U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, with the predictable effect of making them and their colleagues more wary of traveling to the United States.⁷⁵ The preeminent concern has been technology diffusion in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and possible conventional espionage. Yet, the net has been cast more broadly, with affected groups including researchers and students in social sciences and other fields, where the perceived threat—if any—would be united front-like work to influence U.S. views of China or to provide a low-tech version of the gathering of information for possible use in political warfare that U.S. critics identified as a risk from Chinese-owned social media platforms and telecommunications hardware providers.

The impact or potential impact of such efforts to limit pathways for Chinese influence has provoked concerns on U.S. campuses about deleterious effects on academic freedom and research missions, as well as access to information about China.⁷⁶ Responses have taken various forms, including: university presidents' letters reiterating commitments to principles of academic freedom, open exchange, and international engagement; and a policy-oriented scholar's call for campus-based "Freedom of Speech Operations"—a pun on the "Freedom of Navigation Operations" that the U.S. Navy undertakes to challenge China's excessive maritime claims—to address issues that China targets with its

⁷⁵ See, Feng, "Visas are the Newest Weapon"; Elizabeth Redden, "China Issues Warning to U.S.-Bound Students," *Inside Higher Ed*, June 4, 2019; Jane Perlez, "FBI Bars Some China Scholars from Visiting U.S. Over Spying Fears," *New York Times*, Apr. 14, 2019; Yojana Sharma, "Hundreds of Chinese Scholars Face US Visa Restrictions," *University World News*, Apr. 23, 2019, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190423120547316>; and Michael Burke, "Trump Considered Halt to Student Visas for Chinese Nationals," *The Hill*, Oct. 2, 2018.

⁷⁶ Alexandra Yoon-Hendricks, "Visa Restrictions for Chinese Students Alarm Academia," *New York Times*, July 25, 2018; Chang Chiu and Thomas Kellogg, "Banning Chinese Students is Not in the U.S. National Interest," *China File*, Oct. 5, 2018, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/banning-chinese-students-not-us-national-interest>; and Jodi Xu Klein, "US Academics Condemn 'Racial Profiling' of Chinese Students and Scholars over Spying Fears," *South China Morning Post*, Aug. 12, 2019.

sharp power (such as Taiwan's fate, Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests, Uyghurs' subjection to repression in Xinjiang, and so on).⁷⁷

But, overall, the academic pushback has been sporadic and muted, partly out of concern that stronger measures would be seen, or portrayed, as tainted by universities' concern with parochial and financial interests in relationships with China, or the result of their being naïve about China, or insufficiently attentive to national security and national economic security concerns. The February 2020 announcement that the Department of Education was investigating Harvard, Yale, and possibly other elite schools over unreported funding from China is likely to chill further university-based challenges to government restrictions.⁷⁸

U.S. unease about Chinese businesses' operations has moved beyond long-standing concerns about acquisition of national security-sensitive technology, commercial espionage, or unfair economic competition. The focus has extended to more indirect mechanisms of influence through information and ideas. The U.S. moves to restrict Huawei and calls to investigate or limit TikTok and WeChat in part reflected broader concerns that ostensibly private Chinese firms operating in the United States were in league with the Chinese regime or at least could not, or would not, resist its directives. For critics in the U.S. government and beyond, these companies' perceived links, or subservience, to Chinese authorities raised the prospect that their products and platforms could be used, among other things, to garner information that could be weaponized in political warfare directed at U.S. targets, including social media-based, Russian-style election interference operations.⁷⁹

More straightforwardly, Chinese investment in cultural content industries already has faced scrutiny—as in the case of Wanda's acquisition of ownership stakes in U.S. movie theaters and studios.⁸⁰ Although such instances remain

⁷⁷ Rory Truex, "Colleges Should All Stand Up to China," *The Atlantic*, Dec. 28, 2019.

⁷⁸ Kate O'Keeffe, "Education Department Investigating Harvard, Yale over Foreign Funding," *Wall Street Journal*, Feb 13, 2020.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Matt Apuzzo and Michael S. Schmidt, "Secret Backdoor in Some U.S. Phones Sent Data to China, Analysts Say," *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 2016; Ajit Pai, "FCC Answers the Threat from Huawei," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 28, 2019; Tony Romm and Drew Harwell, "TikTok Raises National Security Concerns in Congress as Schumer, Cotton Ask For Federal Review," *Washington Post*, Oct. 24, 2019; and Claudia Biancotti, "The Growing Popularity of Chinese Social Media Outside China Poses New Risks in the West," Peterson Institute for International Economics, Jan. 11, 2019, <https://www.piie.com/blogs/china-economic-watch/growing-popularity-chinese-social-media-outside-china-poses-new-risks>.

⁸⁰ Patrick Brzeski, "China's Wanda to Receive Further Scrutiny for U.S. Entertainment Takeovers (Report)," *Hollywood Reporter*, Dec. 1, 2016, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/chinas-wanda-receive-scrutiny-us-entertainment-takeovers-report-951746>; Edward Wong, "Chinese Purchases of U.S. Companies Have Some in Congress Raising Eyebrows," *New York Times*, Sept. 30, 2016;

anomalous, and reflect exaggerated or as yet unproven concerns, the suspicion in the United States is telling, and it is not hard to imagine more serious variations on the theme in the context of a generally more mistrustful U.S.-China relationship.

China's expanding arsenal for political warfare, and, more clearly, U.S. concerns about countering it, appears to be extending widely across diverse domains. One example is China's BRI, which does not include the United States as an investment-receiving state. From the BRI's inception in the early 2010s, U.S. evaluations stressed its possible geostrategic aims and its potential to create economic leverage that could be used to political ends. More recently, these assessments have added an ideational dimension, with the BRI viewed as a means to promote a Chinese model (despite its lack of soft power appeal) and with the U.S.'s BUILD Act framed as a policy response to the BRI that would promote U.S. values of transparency and legality and that is tied to Washington's self-consciously political-system-type-based "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy.⁸¹

Two Can Play at That Great Power Game

The apparent Chinese aims, and means, for influencing U.S. policy toward China and its interests that have generated so much attention and apprehension in the United States mirror, to some extent, long-running U.S. efforts to shape China and its policies. At least from the PRC's perspective, the recently prominent U.S. criticisms of China and its use of political warfare, sharp power, and kindred means sound hypocritical—expressing outrage at PRC methods that resemble what the United States has been undertaking toward China for many years.

Chinese official and orthodox critics long have attacked what they see as a U.S. strategy of "peaceful evolution." In this view, the U.S.'s multifaceted engagement with Reform-Era China has sought to effect non-violent regime change in the People's Republic, attempting to spread liberal values, promote political reform, and ultimately create a domestic political order that is more similar to the United States', and more palatable to Washington.⁸² Some U.S. political leaders even appeared to say as much (although their statements were aimed more at domestic audiences—including Congress—that were skeptical of deeper engagement with China). As the Clinton administration argued, when calling for

and Erich Schwartzel and Kathy Chu, "China's Influence on Hollywood Grows," *Wall Street Journal*, July 14, 2016.

⁸¹ See, "The Trump Administration's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific,'" Congressional Research Service, Oct. 3, 2018; and "A 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific,'" *Pacific Forum*, Apr. 15-16, 2019, <https://www.pacforum.org/events/%E2%80%9Cfree-and-open-indo-pacific%E2%80%9D-approaches-investment-and-infrastructure>.

⁸² See, Russell Ong, "'Peaceful Evolution,' 'Regime Change' and China's Political Security," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 16, no. 53 (2007), pp. 717-727; Hua Yiwen, "Why is the U.S. So Keen on 'Color Revolutions?'" *People's Daily (Overseas Edition)*, Oct. 11, 2014; and "We Must Adhere to Socialism and Prevent Peaceful Evolution towards Capitalism," *China Daily*, Nov. 23, 1989.

the legislation needed to open the way to China's entry into the WTO, membership in the global economic body would foster market-oriented economic reforms, prosperity, and, in turn, political liberalization in China.⁸³

Throughout much of the Reform Era, Chinese leaders and pro-establishment intellectuals have discerned something analogous to political warfare or sharp power in the propagation into China of the liberal and democratic values that are at least rhetorically championed in U.S. foreign policy. Then-General Secretary and President Jiang Zemin declared that building "socialist democracy" meant building a system suited to "Chinese conditions" and not a "Western, multiparty, parliamentary system." In an interview with foreign media deemed too controversial for coverage at home, then-Premier Wen Jiabao echoed the point, opining that the "development of democracy" in China needed "to take into account China's national conditions" and must be "a system that suits China's special features."⁸⁴ With Xi in power in 2013, a major CCP Central Committee document condemned efforts to promote "Western constitutional democracy," "universal values," civil society, neoliberalism, the "West's idea of journalism," and more, as malign foreign influences threatening China's existing domestic order and CCP leadership.⁸⁵ An ostensibly academic debate in China over constitutionalism focused on similar themes.⁸⁶

When the notion of soft power—closely associated with Joseph Nye, an academic who held a senior position in the Department of Defense under President Clinton—entered U.S. policy discourse, it spotlighted additional potential pathways for U.S. influence in China. From the perspective of the Chinese regime, the agenda, and the means, were not benign, especially given the thick presence in China of many of the identified mechanisms of American soft

⁸³ "The President's News Conference," American Presidency Project, Mar. 29, 2000, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58305>; "Full Text of Clinton's Speech on China Trade Bill," *New York Times*, Mar. 9, 2000; "Premier Zhu Rongji Meets Powell: Cooperation between China, US Conducive to Both," *Xinhua*, July 28, 2001; and Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard, "Bill Clinton's 'Democratic Enlargement' and the Securitisation of Democracy Promotion," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, vol. 26, no. 3 (Sep. 2015), pp. 534-51.

⁸⁴ Jiang Zemin, Political Report to the 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Oct. 12, 1992, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64567/65446/4526308.html>; and Transcript of Interview with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, CNN, Sep. 28, 2008, <https://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/09/29/chinese.premier.transcript/>.

⁸⁵ "Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere" (generally referred to as "Document No. 9").

⁸⁶ Yang Xiaoqing, "A Comparative Study of Constitutional Government and People's Democracy," *Red Flag Manuscripts*, no. 10 (May 2013); Rogier Creemers, "China's Constitutionalism Debate," *The China Journal*, no. 74 (July 2015), pp. 91-109; and Thomas E. Kellogg, "Arguing Chinese Constitutionalism: The 2013 Constitutional Debate and the 'Urgency' of Political Reform," *University of Pennsylvania Asian Law Review*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2016), pp. 338-407.

power, including U.S. popular entertainment, commercial brands, educational exchange programs, and Chinese elites returning from studies in the United States.

In the early 2010s, the notion of “smart power”—closely associated with Secretary of State and later presidential candidate Hillary Clinton (who was strongly regarded in China as “anti-China”)—seemed almost tailor-made to stoke PRC concerns. Characterized as using diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural means “to achieve American objectives and to build American influence,” smart power implied a policy-driven version of using formerly soft power channels of influence to affect Chinese politics and PRC policies.⁸⁷

From the PRC’s perspective, potential battlefields for political warfare or deployment of sharp power long have been tilted in the U.S.’s favor. Seen from this angle, the Chinese agendas and behaviors that have been prompting so much concern and such strong reaction in the United States are (merely) part of an attempt to level the playing field. Indeed, some Chinese reactions to U.S. measures have seemed to illustrate the maxim that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Examples include: adoption of CFIUS-like laws for national security review of inbound investment;⁸⁸ policy initiatives, especially in telecommunications and related sectors, to reduce dependence on U.S. technology and the vulnerabilities to both hacking and economic coercion that such dependence creates—an approach that had special resonance as the U.S. moved to ban Huawei and, in China’s view, impede China’s global rise as a tech power;⁸⁹ re-tightening censorship and strengthening other barriers to prevent information critical of the regime from reaching Chinese audiences through traditional foreign media, their online presences, and social media;⁹⁰ and increasing visa and access denials for U.S.

⁸⁷ See, *A Smarter, More Secure America*, 2018, CSIS Commission on Smart Power, p. 7; and Testimony of Secretary of State-Designate Hillary Rodham Clinton, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jan. 4, 2009, web.archive.org/web/20090124153303/http://state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/01/115196.htm.

⁸⁸ National Security Law of the People’s Republic of China (2015), especially art. 59; Foreign Investment Law of the People’s Republic of China (2019), especially art. 35; and Vincent Chow, “China’s National Security Review: A Case Study of a Supermarket Chain,” *China Law and Practice*, Oct. 11, 2019.

⁸⁹ See, Yuan Yang and Nian Liu, “Beijing Orders State Offices to Replace Foreign PCs and Software,” *Financial Times*, Dec. 8, 2019; 习近平 [Xi Jinping], 在网络安全和信息化工作座谈会上的讲话, [Speech at Symposium on Network Security and Information Work], Apr. 19, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/25/c_1118731175.htm; Paul Mozur and Jane Perlez, “China Quietly Targets U.S. Tech Companies in Security Reviews,” *New York Times*, May 16, 2016; “Commentary: Politicized Ban on Huawei Shows U.S. Losing Spirit of Openness,” *Xinhua*, May 22, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/22/c_138080769.htm; and Li Wei, “Towards Economic Decoupling? Mapping Chinese Discourse on the China-US Trade War,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 12, no. 4 (Winter 2019), pp. 519-556.

⁹⁰ Li Yuan, “A Generation Grows Up in China Without Google, Facebook, or Twitter,” *New York Times*, Aug. 6, 2018; “China Blocks Websites, Internet Accounts in New Cleanup Campaign,” *Reuters*, June 12, 2019; “The Great Firewall of China,” *Bloomberg*,

scholars (including those directly or indirectly influential with the U.S.'s China policymakers).⁹¹

Toward a New Cold War and Beijing as the New Moscow?

Thus far, China's development and deployment of instruments of political warfare or sharp power to influence U.S. politics and policy concerning China and Chinese interests have been relatively limited, at least if judged against the standard of a full-fledged ideational conflict. In the United States, rapidly rising concerns about Chinese influence efforts have focused more on risks or potential risks, and less on effects thus far demonstrably achieved. But the mechanisms of sharp power and the methods of political warfare surely will be used more aggressively if the deteriorating relationship between the United States and China becomes a new cold war, which some observers foresee or already discern.⁹²

There have been assertions—mostly fragmentary and polemical—that Beijing already has greatly escalated political warfare and exercises of sharp power against the United States by taking pages from the Russian playbook. For example, President Trump and Vice President Pence have asserted that China was “attempting to interfere” in the 2018 midterm elections, even as Trump flippantly invited Chinese hacking to aid his 2020 reelection bid.⁹³ There is much more substantial evidence that China has made use of such higher-impact political warfare and sharp power in other contexts—principally Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Major international social media companies determined that mainland-based accounts undertook a coordinated, source-masked effort to spread false information, sow discord, and polarize public opinion to undercut the protest movement in Hong Kong in 2019. And China-based platforms—including in the versions used by many Hong Kongers and some U.S. residents—blocked or

Nov. 5, 2018; Geremie R. Barme and Sang Ye, “The Great Firewall of China,” *Wired*, Jan. 6, 1997.

⁹¹ Emily Feng, “Visas are the Newest Weapon in U.S.-China Rivalry,” *NPR*, Apr. 25, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/25/716032871/visas-are-the-newest-weapon-in-u-s-china-rivalry>; Orville Schell and Larry Diamond, “China Gets Its Message to Americans but Doesn’t Want to Reciprocate,” *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 21, 2018; and “US ‘Deeply Concerned’ after China Denies US Reporter Visa,” *Associated Press*, Aug. 23, 2018.

⁹² See, for example, Niall Ferguson, “The New Cold War? It’s with China and it has Already Begun,” *New York Times*, Dec. 2, 2019; Robert D. Kaplan, “A New Cold War Has Begun,” *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 7, 2019; and Odd Arne Westad, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Are Washington and Beijing Fighting a New Cold War?” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 98, no. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 2019), pp. 86-95.

⁹³ David Nakamura and Ellen Nakashima, “Without Offering Evidence, Trump Accuses China of Interfering in U.S. Midterm Elections,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 26, 2018; “Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration’s Policy toward China”; and Peter Baker and Eileen Sullivan, “Trump Publicly Urges China to Investigate Bidens,” *New York Times*, Oct. 3, 2019.

impeded content favorable to, or concerning, the protest movement.⁹⁴ In Taiwan, government officials, politicians, independent experts, and “fact checking” NGOs have found that mainland-based content-providers and manipulators of social media and PRC-backed traditional media have been subverting Taiwan’s democracy. On some assessments, surreptitious Chinese interference boosted significantly the fortunes of Han Kuo-yu—the unconventional, anti-establishment, and populist candidate who secured the Kuomintang’s (KMT) nomination for mayor of Taiwan’s second most important city and won an upset victory in the general election in November 2018. As the 2020 presidential and legislative elections approached (and with Han running as the KMT’s presidential candidate), many sources in Taiwan and beyond warned that Chinese clandestine intervention would recur, possibly with significant effects on outcomes and dangerous consequences for Taiwan’s democracy.⁹⁵

China has not yet shown the capacity, or any clear intention, to attempt in the United States what it has undertaken in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Although the Hong Kong and Taiwan cases offer something of a proof of concept, their implications for the United States are limited by features of those polities not found in the United States: the targeted societies’ cultural proximity to China; the presence of significant local “pro-Beijing” populations—and operatives; and Beijing’s insistence that the targeted societies’ internal politics are domestic Chinese affairs. As some observers of China’s international ideational initiatives have pointed out, with the partial exception of areas that Beijing officially considers to be Chinese territory, the PRC’s agenda has been primarily defensive, seeking to secure international space for its autocratic polity, protecting itself from isolation and encroachment by the United States and like-minded states.⁹⁶ Such an ostensibly, and perhaps even sincerely, defensive agenda does spill over into more aggressive and transformative pursuits: influencing the U.S.’s (and other states’) policies toward a broader range of international issues important to China,

⁹⁴ See, for example, John Dotson, “Chinese Covert Social Media Propaganda and Disinformation Related to Hong Kong,” *Jamestown Foundation China Brief*, vol. 19, no. 16 (Sept. 6, 2019) (findings and responses by Twitter, Facebook, Google, and YouTube); and Arjun Kharpal, “How Social Media is Shaping What People Know—and Don’t Know—about the Hong Kong Protests,” *CNBC*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/13/hong-kong-protests-role-of-technology-and-china-censorship.html>.

⁹⁵ See, for example, Raymond Zhong, “Awash in Disinformation Before Vote, Taiwan Points Finger at China,” *New York Times*, Jan. 6, 2020; Anna Fifield, “Russia’s Disinformation Campaign in the U.S. Has Nothing on China’s Efforts in Taiwan,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 8, 2020; Brian Hioe, “Fighting Fake News and Disinformation in Taiwan: An Interview with Puma Shen,” *New Bloom*, Jan. 6, 2020, <https://newbloommag.net/2020/01/06/puma-shen-interview/>; and Paul Huang, “Chinese Cyber-Operatives Boosted Taiwan’s Insurgent Candidate,” *Foreign Policy*, June 26, 2019.

⁹⁶ See, Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?” *International Security*, vol. 37, no. 4 (2013), pp. 7-48; and Jessica Chen Weiss, “A World Safe for Autocracy? China’s Rise and the Future of Global Politics,” *Foreign Affairs*, July-Aug. 2019.

offering ideational support to developing-country authoritarian regimes attracted by the China model, and eroding a rules-based international order that China sometimes or in some respects sees as serving U.S. interests and harming China's. Such efforts by Beijing, although posing challenges for U.S. foreign policy, remain short of the dangerous meddling in American democracy that has been undertaken by Moscow—and that might be attempted by Beijing on some of the worst-case scenarios for the future of U.S.-China relations.

